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Coils of Mortal Flesh



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For Bate Besong

(In Memoriam)

1954 - 2007

Beyond the twilight
The myriad colour and the dazzle of the
Rainbow
Confirm our mortality.
The mortal coils of flesh peel off
And resurrection awaits us
Large at the foot of the cross on Calvary
While we pray for us at the hour of our birth.

Kofi Awoonor

(From "That Flesh is Heir To")

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To the Reader

Except for “The Ascent” that was written in March 2007 when Bate Besong passed away, the rest of the poems in this collection were composed and published between 1973 and 1992. The collection spans three decades and cuts across Africa and North America. From Bamenda to Limbe, Yaoundé to Benin City, Windsor to Halifax, I had ceaselessly been searching for a voice, a kind of order that would impose meaning to my life. The different voices in the various poems are, in reality, a single voice; and the journey from *Awakening*, along the broad path of *Moonlight Spells & Wreaths* that leads to *Laments* is an uninterrupted continuum in the quest for self in the persona’s existence. Included as an afterthought, the *Epilogue* is a symbolic moment of revelation in which Form and the manifested Word play the primordial game of hide and seek. It betrays the false sense of mortal consciousness in the beginning. Truth and real hope, at least for the persona-protagonist, exist in the transcendence of a spiritual resurrection when the body is dissolved and the fettered Word is ultimately set free.

— Ba’bila Mutia

AWAKENING

Sacrifice

We found
the sacrifice at dawn:
a chilly ritual,
broken clay pot smashed to pieces
bearing the remains of a stale meal
in a soot-coated basket.

They had
chosen the narrow crossroads
to pacify the spirits

and the faint smell of gunpowder
from rusty flint guns still hung
in the mist-soaked air.

They did not hear the mocking chant of
the mad man in the distance:
*those who hold the
secrets of life and death
live in the stream.*

Bali, June 1975

Ntsi Su' Fu*

(Bali, December 1975)

This gentle gargle,
The sparkle of eternal youth
Gurgling down the mountain side
Makes detour of huge boulders,
Heaving huge escarpments
Into ravines, timeless abysses
That sway the mortal mind.

Year after year
My ancestors drank
Out of thy waters,
The secret of immortality
Like a heartless harlot,
Eluding their desires of ages:
Their short lives at the mercy of time

Six feet they were
Buried forever, even
Their children, they too
Searched and drank

Now dusk,
And this twilight
Diminishing at the velvet touch
Of a drowning sun.
Naked I walk, barefoot,
To embrace the mystery
Of these waters.

Let me reach forward
Stoop down and with
These cupped palms
Raise the waters to my lips.

The waters slip through
These mortal fingers
Eternity slips away,
Lost, lost forever in
This river of life.

**A river where the Lela flags are washed on the first day of the Lela festival.*

Mo Nkwani

Planted again into
the bowels of the fresh earth
the recycling spirit escapes,
roams in empty cornfields,
cornstalks shadows of spiritland
in mischievous glee of triumph.

And the diviner's revelation
in haughty laughter,
the muffled tones of incantations
and the cast of cowrie shells:

*It was not death by accident
nor the wish of departed ancestors.
The wizards had no hands in it,
neither had the mother peeped
through the cracked crevices
of a mud-house to steal a glance
at the dreaded Voma* masquerade.*

The spirit will return
in another pregnancy, to be born,
die and be reborn
in the endless cycle of anguish
for the tired uterus
of an aging mother.

This time incisions shall be
forged on the forehead of
the wretched corpse and
let us await the prodigal
return of the accursed spirit.

The seasons in their rise and fall
go and return,
and now in the harshness
of this harmattan
her womb is gripped in agonizing
pangs of uterine contractions.

With chalk, camwood,
a white cockerel
and palm kernel oil
the mother is bathed in the *Mo Nkwani* ritual:
the reluctant spirit shall now be tethered to new flesh.

In its tension the umbilical cord
is stretched, slashed with faultless precision,
snaps into streaming mixtures
of blood and fluids,
the fresh forehead incision
the screams of protest
against the rancid foulness of
this makeshift maternity home:

It is *Mo Nkwani*,
cursed spiritchild
from spiritland
bound to scourge the tired womb of
this unhappy woman who has
unwillingly become its mother.

Trapped in the web
of its own timeless cycles
the child has come to stay.

**A Bali-Nyonga secret society*

Dawn

The first cockcrow:
children turn
in their sleep,
disturbed by the
return of spirits
to the cemetery.
This is the false dawn.

A few hours after midnight,
the dew is still accumulating
and spiders work endlessly,
spinning new webs
that shall be broken
by the early morning feet
of women hurrying away to distant farms.

The second cockcrow:
witches are safely
back in their huts
and men shake off
the memories of nightmares.
The clock birds and partridges
join the first mortars and pestles
to usher in the true dawn.

Before the sun
announces itself over
the copper-brown horizon,
naked feet of villagers
are already on their way
to wake the silent markets.

Insanity

Virgin forest paths
I trod,
Bearing burdens into
The undeciphered chasms,
Timeless rebirths into
My endless existence

Mad man,
My scalp, putrescent,
Haven to the welcome
Swarm of friendly flies.
First or last reincarnation
I know not.

When these fits descend,
The quill in fury
Assaults the paper.

Impatient they know not
But dismiss reality
With a wave of ignorance.

The lunatic at work
Mad, mad again:
Now cosmic conscious,
Mad man, with a difference.

Birth Cry

Once,
in the inky blackness
of some uterine universe
there was no day, no night,
just the overwhelming
beat
of a single heart,
like a giant drumbeat
filling all space in an empty
night.

I was a
prisoner,
bound to serve
a jail term in perpetual
darkness:
groping for salvation
in a universe
I could not comprehend.

When I yelled in the
triumph
of my postnatal cry
I thought I was free:
from darkness to
light,
from confinement to
freedom;
the first smells and sounds
opened up another world of
new drumbeats and night.

Now,
it is a new prison.
Locked up in a
world of time and night,
my birth cry is
now my death cry as I grope
in another darkness.

Taste

Men,
Like termite-eating lizards
That give tongues
To weird appetites
Weigh not their
Pleasures on scales.

Judge not the choice.

The excellence of taste
Rests with the tongue
And not with the beholder.

After the Apple

Years of coarse hardship,
chaotic cacophony reminiscent
of a play-staged warfare;
the victory belongs to the gods,
their black avenging sabre strikes.

In its wake,
cold, silent clay,
lips drawn back
in the grin of death:
rapidly rotting
in six-foot inheritance.

Fingers of the gods
probing broad byways again;
fast hooting procession:
this time—light verdict.
Accident victims are trapped
in the blazing inferno and mangled metal,
bodies charred beyond identification.

Today I stripped to the skin
and gazed at the full-length mirror:
original Adam before
Eve passed the apple.
Impact of reflected revelation;
I possess nothing
beneath these synthetic fabrics,
and I swallow the nude shame,
the emptiness and insecurity
disguised in pride and pomp,
the sin of self-deceit.

The Traveller*

I

On that side of the highway,
overlooking the church,
the zinc and bamboo shack
bares its chest in defiance,
feeding foaming palm wine
to its converts with the froth and energy
of the tapster's miracle at dawn.

Ghost lorries roar past;
the weary traveller's shouts and tears
swallowed up by dust fall on deaf panels:
he moves on leaving bawdy jokes
and empty laughter hanging
on the rafters of the shack.

The outspread wings of
a bronze eagle and organ music
are sole custodian of the Word
in this realm of sainted windows.

II

A ragged barbed wire fence
separates him from
the cross-surmounted steeple.
He moves on, searching ...
Another open truck,
Sardine-packed with passengers,
the narrow bridge
and the violent screech of brakes;
below the bridge,
pieces of bone and flesh,
a black rise of buttocks,
float momentarily with
a red trickle like a woman
washing her monthly pain in a thin river.

Trapped under the bridge
the Word remains unseen,
mocking and teasing
the tired traveller
in its kaleidoscopic mirages
that blind the seeker along the road.

*A poetic adaptation of Wole Soyinka's *The Road*

Limbo

In my dreams,
formless,
without a body,
I dine with saints
amidst soul-soothing sounds
music unlike music
in this heights of
dancing multilights,
and the angelus bell
tolling all day.

When I am awake,
lifeless,
without a soul
I feast with sinners,
voices without voices
in the stale whiff of
cheap perfumes and
stench of sweat
from decaying flesh.

Not awake, not asleep,
my spirit is willed to flesh,
and now cursed and godforsaken
I am bound to roam the cosmos
fettered to eternal damnation.

Budding Seasons

(for Bate Besong on seeing the maiden issue of Oracle in 1978)

In the purgatory of these lifeless seasons
 we swallowed the
 bitter herbs of silence;

Until now
 the shrine lay in bondage
 inhumed in the stale
debris of dunghill desecration.

Tongues weighed down by the
 burden of corroded nuggets,
 in the fervour of unspoken prophecies
we trampled on the acorns of time
 shattering the spell that
 wrapped the copse,
the secret grove in mystery.

This spherulic sarcophagus cracks and
 Okigbo's* lead-stained blood
 drips in solemn transmigration,
resuscitating our souls,
 our burden of pregnant silence:
 giving freedom to warriors and
budding lunatics to perform the rites.

Then the oracle spoke:
 pharos for schizophrenics
barked its challenge of defiance
 potent prophecies of time
intertwined puzzle-knots
to task fertile imagination.

Let there be light:
 and darkness ceased to be,
banished in the genesis of procreative lunacy;
 and the warriors leaped, leaped
in Pentecost-exaltation,
in the ecstasy of the new epiphany.

And the blood in canonized purity flowed,
 exposing for one instance
the magnificence of the maiden,
 the priestess of the shrine,
the glowing radiance of rebirth,
to proclaim the second coming.

**Nigerian poet killed during the Nigerian civil war while fighting at the war front.*

MOONLIGHT SPELLS & WREATHS

Song I

(For Etonde: those days in Bota)

In the innocence of
our youthful faiths
we used to listen,
greedy audiences in bygone days,
to the echo of liturgies
from stained glass windows.

Together under coconut tree shadows
we clasped hands in youthful mantras,
victims of false visions
and false trances—transfigured
in ash Wednesdays, holy Mondays
and endless saint days.

We saw consecrated candles
melt in variegated lotus patterns,
sabbatical miracles in mists of incense,
and in the purity of pre-knowledge
we were awed by masked believers
as they marched past in solemn processions,
to receive holy communion.

Used to listen to mellifluous
peals of the angelus, chiming
the ghosts of wedding bells.

Enslaved in passion songs,
in earthworm blindness,
I let my youthful soul
flame on, and on,
fanning desires that smouldered
down to impassive ash.

Now I remember,
I walked out into the consoling rain,
walked out of our lives
as the dark and brown torrents
washed away my mucky footprints,
re-cleansing the memories
eroding our dreams of youth.

Lips scorched in distaste of some
inner emotions enacted in the drama
of this sudden meeting:
that arrogant wedding ring
bears the evidence.
Our youthful ardour, our promises
have been betrayed
by another irreversible vow.

Song II

(For Mojoko)

We weaved love wreaths
in erstwhile nights
refrained love songs
in sea breeze nights
braided coconut palm frond lyrics,
mixing love portions
as I danced to your hypnotizing rhythm
of indecision, protection, secrecy.

And we went on, creating melodies,
listening to the hissing
protest of battling waves,
twin shadows, alone,
our unfinished songs
on the lips of dawn.

With copras and coral shells
we made melodies with
flicking tongues on fire,
as I sang sea songs
to ivory white teeth,
never getting to know
the chameleon secrets
of your silent smiles,
gap-teeth sighs of obscurity.

I got swallowed up
in exuberant passions
as ripples of dancing shadows
urged my pulsating manhood
awaiting initiation in the
mysteries of ecstatic thighpools.

I was urged on, and on
into the orgasmic abyss,
the colossal crescendo,
exploding dormant consciousness
to novel voyages of discovery.

Today, bubbles of long gone memories
like haunting nightmares
float to forgotten surfaces,
bleeding long dead scars:
and me, wishing, even hoping
with sighs of remorse that
it was only a dream.

Waiting

(For E.M.N.)

Waiting
in this vast expanse,
the ocean of your carnal exorcism:
indifferent, inert, apathetic;

Your reverse gear tactics
leave me,
cursed prodigal,
to cast these jewels,
these burnished sapphires
at the frigid feet of your nudity.

Oh sniggering goddess,
I defy this wanton oblation
to sacrifice these virgin rubies
on the esoteric altar
of your stubborn passions.

If this be opium
allow me sniff it,
let me drench myself
in the lecherous heat
of your she-goat odour
chaining the poet to your yoke of conceit,
writhing my soul to become sanctuary for maggots,
soaking my blistered passions to cinders,
waiting ...

Flee, you fiery passions,
set me free!

They cannot be banished.
I am trapped,
left to crouch in accumulated potency,
overdue,
waiting ...

Mine has become the eternal
Imbroglia of Tantalus;
left at the discordant extremes,
your pool of haughtiness,
dangling papayas of desire.

Within reach, out of reach.

Allow me inhale the
twilight fragrance of your persecution
waiting ...

Poet to Poet

(To Ohi Alegbe: Benin City)

Dance not to the
Illusory tempo of
Sight and distance.

For this blind outlet of
Creative starvation,
Stealthy break of lonely desire
In this obscure labyrinth,
Amidst the multiple cobweb
Nightmare I suffer
Exposes the heart's frailty
To the dormant virility
Of a cold, mute clay.

Horns locked in this
Infinite reality of awareness
Let us exploit the
Fertile matrices and harvest
These wreaths of creative virginity.

Peals of mirth
Rumble thro' my frame
My wheel now in full cycle turns,
Grounded prey—again
To the arrogant vanity
Of heartless nipples.

Tonight

(For Patience Ugbodu: Benin City)

The riddle of life lies
in the merging of hearts;
the key to life
is the final harmony of hearts.

But tonight,
this moonlit night hallows my manhood,
spells sperm auras and
grills my nude chest
with flames from twin breasts
on orgasmic fires
that would smoulder at dawn.

Tonight,
clouds of a long trip home
obscure the moonbeams
of my moon
of my dreams
of my love,
tonight ...

Even this frantic exchange of
pulses and fiery breaths
traps and betrays us
in deceptive passions and delusions
of fleeting love
for the moon,
her joy of youth
her smile of bloom
her silence of innocence,
is eclipsed by Christmas comets.

Within cosmic microseconds,
swift wings of modernity
would lead me, tomorrow
on to home.

Alone,
I will watch
the darkness break into dawn,
pulsating sunrays
evaporate the morning dew
as copper clouds shall
echo the mocking laughter of the gods.

So tonight
let us banish anxiety and loneliness
and explore the fierceness
and passions of now
for tomorrow ushers
yet another day
in a moonless night.

The Scourge

alone
i stand
bloodied
naked and secrets exposed

a million offsprings
flushed away
into forgotten cisterns,
left behind
in obscure whorehouses

alone
i plead
for sanctuary
from the purity of her breasts:

“forsaken prodigal,
where are they
who loved you now?”
she sneers
and throws the first stone
that will usher
my scourge of purification.

That Cologne

(For Nadine: Prince Edward Island, August 1983)

Memories:

a blur of broken images,
lips,
hallowed lights in low mist,
elongated dusk shadows—grotesque
full moon and baying mongrels on heat.

Disco lights

and empty streets,
the departure with
the haunting whiff of that
ever-incessant cologne.

Passion:

compressed in units
of pregnant thoughts,
worded unto parchments,
engraved on
virgin-pure sheets
and swallowed up in
the yawning orifice of
a crimson-stained Canada Post letter box.

Meeting:

fast heartbeat
frenzied embrace
lips—unchanged, parched,
the room,
and silence—the silence of knowledge:

a ruffle of sheets
beads of hot sweat
the endless tick-tock of the clock,
the pendulum, as it swings:

the long awaited ...
the long—
awaited, the long—
the ecstatic blackout
and the bliss ...

Distance

(*To Liengur**)

Multiple shapeless forms
like bloated balloons
dance
on the needle tips
of my mind,
and thoughtless bubbles
burst,
fizzle away into
a universe still in its infancy.

This babble of empty voices
dilutes my overflowing horn of plenty
but no ear,
no tongue to hear
and to taste
this fiery throb of passion and desire,
with you so far away ...

My heart's relish is
seeded on passing winds,
into parched earth;
hooded hulks, bent double,
scampering away under the threat
of another snow blizzard.

Torn into bits of hope without hope,
deluded, I await the hour of redemption
when the flowing strands of your hair
shall drug me
into the sleep that will
usher my final awakening.

Let me slumber in my dreams
curled in your woven selves,
like strands of plaited hydrangea,
as I wake up
from dreams into dreams,
as I suffer still
from the jabs of distance,
urging my horn into
a jittery jive of fragments:

And once more, in the turbulence
of this chaotic assemblage
my agony becomes again.

**Sea goddess of youth, beauty, wealth, and fertility.*

Freedom

(For Liengu*)

When I love you
 I will serve you
erect a
a shrine
 and appease
 the flaming fires
 of your divinity
that spell out your name
over the luminous
starlit ocean
 which the other goddesses
 fear to tread on.

If you love me
 you will dissolve down
and melt
into me
 lose your divine heartbeat
 let it merge
 with mine
then
I too
will become a god.

When you love me
 there will be
no god
no goddess
 my servitude
 and
 your dissolution
would be
the beginning of
a newfound freedom
 which
 eyes can see
 but tongues cannot express
and then
we shall become.

**A human female and namesake to the Fako goddess.*

Youth

(To a stubborn goddess: Calabar, 1978)

The shrine that holds
the mystery of your heart
sacrosanct,
dormant in love-exile,
the mawkish virus
of lustful youth
crumbles
at this midday melting
of my soul
searching for you in a broken shrine.

After this ritual
of meek prostration
my mind staggers still
at the touch of that
fresh living blood
which oozed from
the doctor's scalpel yesterday,
seeping away your
glow of fleeting youth:

and the midday cicatrix,
memories of clinical antiseptic,
the sarcophagus nightmare
in dreaded anaesthesia,
reminds us that life is brief,
beauty, short-lived.

Today, the embers of a dying fire
have been stirred to life
and I stand witness,
here with you,
lost in the frailty
of your youth.

Ash

Such a spontaneous
burst
of fire and passion
has now, it seems,
smouldered
down to dribblets
of cold ash.

Even as cold winter stretches
her frigid fingers
the Pictou* ferry
that once set
my heart on flames
is now a distant blur.

My unsung melodies
broken,
desire and infatuation
frozen,
waiting for another
spring to thaw:

Solitary traveller,
twisted
by the gnarled, grotesque
tentacles of wanton fate,
abandoned
to gather the broken pieces
of sour dust and memories
that have become distant ashes.

**A county in Nova Scotia, from where the Prince Edward Island ferry departs.*

Dance Steps

I used to dance
many dances,
dancing to the
strained beats of taut drums
and the maidens in masked smiles
beckoned me to dance nearer,
across the stream
into barren valleys
where my fertile seeds
were strangled in
the acidity of falsehood.

I had watched days
fade away into
setting suns and dark nights,
my hopes had
set with the suns:
all that beauty of sunlit days
lost in the
agony of hopelessness.

Then I tried to dance again
but my feet ached
after endless dances on
rocks and hard ground.

Now the rhythm of a new drum
overwhelms my sad song,
a new maiden beckons me
across the stream:

Sweat-soaked face
from dances of yesterdays
and drenched eyes
obscure my vision
to see and to hear
whether the song of her drum,
its rhythm of fertility,
its hope for life,
will give my seeds
a new hope to bury their roots
in the womb of a new earth.

Twin Spirits

Bound together
by immortal passion
we breathe
the breath
of a mortal world.

And I search and search
for lost time,
past ages and time
that will unveil the origin
of our many selves.

I wait, my heart
enduring the scourge,
the plaited agony:

I wait, my tongue
gall-heavy with this
sponge of passion.

As I wait, sniffing
the shadow of
your faint perfume.

Suddenly,
in the pale hope of dawn,
in the glowing embers
of your pupils,
I see myself
alive
in the eternity of
a thousand reincarnations.

First Music Lesson*

(For Terry-Ann Thompson: so many questions, few answers)

Tragedies
that strike so suddenly
like lightning,
crippling, maiming.

Memories,
suffocating, bitter,
the wages of sin and karma
that we bear,
our cross that none
but we must carry
as we trudge, blood-drenched faces
staggering towards Golgotha.

Conflicts,
discordant like the isolated
sharps & flats
on the Yamaha keyboard.

In this vortex,
the left hand, frail anima,
lost pilgrim in Dante's inferno
strikes the C major,
and the deluded dance
of atoms in a desperate
swirl of cacophony
search for the elusive godhead.

The right hand
dances to the gloomy shades
of black and white keys,
the solitary spectrum of impotent animus.

In this ethereal stillness,
soul-searching melody
of left and right,
ageless,
makes the universe stand still:
deceptive interlude of pregnant silence,
just for a while
before the fragile man-woman-made china
shatters again in a thousand fragments.

**Halifax, November 1984*

Departure

(Farewell to Ba Domatob: Bali, May 1973)

A dozen feet trample
The dirge dance-steps
On dust-brown paths.

The masquerades,
Amulets poised at arm-length,
Suspend the crows of
Cockerels that dare to crow;
And the tremulous clash
Of metallic spear-heads
Welcome his passage.

Smiles masked in spiritual knowledge,
The sudden stampede
And fear on human faces
At the midday stillness
And dissolution of mortal flesh.

No more brewed corn beer
No more palm wine
No more cane baskets of corn meal
No more mortality,
Only insights of a new awakening.

The fast-footed masquerades
Stamp the bare ground,
Frenzied beats of mad drums
In pursuit of ancestral rites.

What material farce,
Fated cosmic sojourners
They eat, they dance.

Now the bullet-ridden
Kolanut tree keeps vigil,
Memories of cordite and gunpowder,
Flint gun respects in farewell
Salute to another passage.

Ebony Drums

(*To Apollo Kilo*: Victoria, 1974*)

He rides along
trapped by the anger of
an enraged engine
screaming in frenzy
with some hidden malice;
man's own invention
performed the dreary ritual,
muffled grunt in cold surprise.

A child's chant:
let me live long
may I live out my life
let me have life.

A mother's prayer:
may the children bury us
let them live long
may we not bury them.

But this shattered pearl at youth,
one son in all
has danced the dance of death.

Wail of black flutes,
ebony drums at dawn-mist
refrain the dirge of departure
as he, discarnate, crosses the stream,
head bowed in silence
listening to the faint chant
of the funeral procession.

Saints and sinners
watched, tongue-tied:
byway ritual
overdue gluttony of gods,
atonement for evil
to the gods of Church Street,
silent reprisals of fornicated priestesses.

But the road still waits,
famished shrine, drunk with
the sacrifice of innocent blood.

**Apollo was killed in an accident on Church Street, in Victoria.*

LAMENTS

Adieu Calabar

(August 1978)

No regrets.
Amidst pangs of
Hunger-ridden bowels
The vultures perched
Relishing expectancy for carrion.

Your yellow-faced
Bleached whores,
Bodies coated with camwood,
Discovered talents
Between ready thighs
Running riot at the
Vapid touch of cupidity.

Sustained by maggots
The vultures preyed
Down on my scorched soul.

Balanced on the roof of
The arrogant Metropolitan*
They gaze down
In ego-styled apathy at the
Crushed-millipede-soreness
Of thatched poverty.

Starved to coma
I did, of late,
Host Mary Slessor's wraith
In mournful retribution,
Witness to the thunderous
Charge of apocalyptic horsemen,
Bloody scimitars, wrath avenged
On fleeing scavengers.

My mock-salute and triumph.

The ferry calls,
And am not yet carrion, not yet.

**A popular hotel in Calabar.*

Survivors

I

After the torments of this epidemic
the harsh recoil
 of choleric rifles,
 we raised our heads from the battle-torn,
flaming infernos of trenches,
after the siege

And they came out of the trenches
we came out
 souls torn in the harsh
 chorus of hissing gas:
they were all crimson-stained,
smeared in the after-blood of survival.

But we had seen Ojo* fall
at the wake of howling shells
 Ojo had fallen, and Nuhu too
 and a dozen others
in ambush by zombie soldiers
aping their demented mentors.

Unholy evangelists of Idi Amin, Soweto
drawing blood from arteries
 that once gave life to warm bodies,
 they dashed tender heads
on street pavements, exposing mixtures
of blood and brains to spectators.

When the funeral hearse procession
lumbers home—home, bitter home,
 you will be absent and witness not
 the scalp-raising wail of broken hearts
for you rendered unto Dodan barracks
what was due to the gods.

II

We emerged
in some infernal inferno
 our souls torn out
 of our flesh
and the truth dawned:
these were mangled cadavers—unreal!

Ojo, Nuhu, and the dozen others,
their gorged eyeballs,
 final havoc of bayonets
 only mocked the grotesque grin of ghastly corpses
bearing the banner of foolhardiness,
the grim wages of scapegoats.

A measure of pennies, a measure of maize,
three measures of corn would amount a penny;
 so they broke the fourth seal
 and let loose the fourth horseman
charging in plunder on his pale horse,
destroying all, but oil and wine.

There were sieges
and rumours of sieges;
 for the sake of the unelect
 the days would be lengthened:
out there in the hereafter,
in some cosmic time continuum,

In King Belshazza's hall,
those who could see
 saw the writing on the wall
 and at once
the craftsmen were summoned
to build Noah's ark again.

**Akintunde Ojo, Nuhu, and other Nigerian university students killed by federal soldiers in the 1978 "Ali Must Go" students' disturbances during General Olusegun Obasanjo's military rule.*

Dialogue

1st Speaker: We were tethered in
the heart of the forest
to hew huge slabs of timber,
build roofs over our naked heads
to keep away the crows and vultures
that came across the seas
to perch on our skulls.
We thought we had acquired
our long-sought freedom.

2nd Speaker: Drugged by the fumes of
the hostile forest,
we shifted our burden
to the new leaders.
They would carry on the struggle
for our weary bodies had
become diseased with age.

1st Speaker: The apostles came dressed
in white robes
bearing gold trinkets, and
with the word of a white god
converted us to believers.
Shrines gave way to pulpits,
then soapboxes were mounted
for slogans of solidarity,
new awareness, and new freedom
blaring from megaphones.

2nd Speaker: The first parliament was
composed of converts—expert cooks
who offered platters of rotten porridge,
football and beer for the
first five-year development plan.
A gallery of court jesters
back-benched the deliberations,
hand-clapping in unison
when *Grand Camarade* farted or belched.

1st Speaker: The second parliament
was a motley circus
of converted toadies,
making recommendations for decrees
to confine the deaf, mute, and blind
to communal settlements, permitting
them to dance once a week
to pipers' tunes and xylophones,
if the din was confined
within reasonable bounds.

2nd Speaker: They acquired land, looted the treasury
and overnight houses emerged
from the same earth where
anthills had thrived:
dramatic transformation
from poverty to pot-bellied landlords
amidst the yawning abyss of
rural exploitation and
peasant wretchedness.
In gold-decked mansions and
undaunted profligacy they
bathe in the fur-soothing
vanity of Parisian serenity.

1st Speaker: The deaf and mute watch,
confined to be
eunuchs in their land,
tongue-tied in dread of
eternal silence or disappearance
at twilight or dawn.

2nd Speaker: The morphia, intoxicating stench
of the breweries
soothes the strain-stuffed life
of the inmates
bathing in camwood streams of ignorance
solace decked on the
next parliamentary elections.

Gong of Nemesis

Yaoundé:

Enrich yourself now,
You predatory hounds
Adorned in money-coloured garments,
Fetid overcoats of greed.
Replenish your pockets with the
Blood-soaked sweat of
Perspiring, ragged peasants.

When the gong of Nemesis
Sounds its toll
Not even the prophet's presence
Will save you
And your *bikutsi**-dancing
Vin rouge-drinking kinsmen.

May it not be,
Let not the pus-bloated tumour
Spill in the streets
And drown the
Song of the innocent,
Let it not be.

Let the prophet be absent
And taste not the
Over sour egress,
Vengeful vent of overburdened spleens,
Nor the double-angered
Fierceness of belching barrels.

**A popular dance rhythm.*

Obituary

(Christmas sequel: for Bobe Ngom Jua, Benin City, December 31, 1977)

The Njinikom lion that roared
Across the mountains,
Crouching in talon-fierceness,
With his callous hide,
Immune to blunt, crooked spears
In the hands of acolyte hunters,
Lives no more:
Silenced to dust, forever.

Why did the chief priest
Decide to kiss mother earth?
Why did he prostrate
At the mistake of Njinikom gods?
Now he sits with departed ancestors,
Threading spools of history,
While shadows of doubt
Loom in a hazy horizon.

Where is *Afo-a-Kom's** wisdom
To slay his own priest
And shatter his shrine?
Where is the god's wisdom
To allow his shrine become
Rheum grounds for rogues?
Or did the gods
In drunken folly
Slay their own priest?

He departs,
Leaving unfulfilled appetites,
The priest departs in delusion
With unrealized promises
To a land of milk and honey for his people.

Say did you see the wreaths,
The last exequies of derision?
The vulture's triumph
Is in the final
Twitch of the carcass.

The priest departs
And the initiates stand
The ordeal in the
Sacred grove of chastity
As he departs in delusion
Leaving the anointed initiates
As they chant the lonely litany
Their mournful dirge of allegiance
To cleanse the odorous
Faeces of filthmakers.

Apocalyptic Emanations

Slumber eludes my eyes
Rest is torn out of my mind
Sleep has escaped me;
The spittle in my mouth
Has become the distasteful
Agony of my torture.

We entrusted hope on you
The torchbearers,
The flamecarriers,
But you tread on lost paths
On broken caskets,
Scooping the dregs
Of Parisian champagne
And bottled water distilled
In *de Gaullian* vaults.

Bones of our ancestors
Creak in agony,
Cremated ashes of tortured prisoners
Simmer in purgatory
Waiting for redemption.

My mind bears the
Rancid stench of your sores
And slumber eludes my eyes.

You will wake up
From your slumber of deceit,
Get out of your sleep one morning,
Get up at the true dawn
And stumble upon my gnarled cadaver
Shed tears of untruth
To discover this architect
Of untold prophecies
Has become mute,
Facing the wall of loneliness in my
Last convulsions of spiritual agony.

The only cipher to my footprints
Shall be the faecal remonstrations
Of a mind in agony
Because of a people in anguish.

I swallow my bile
In bitter fear of defeat.
But I will mould this day,
Silently,
A mind bitter and sore.

You bloated apostles of falsehood
Have led us
To reunification swamps,
Thrown mud in our eyes
And left us blind pilgrims
In a fruitless search for identity.

My legacy to you,
Your inheritance shall be
The acidic fart of my tortured spirit
That like some wandering spectre
Will haunt the stale marrow of
Your fetid consciences
And corrode your naked treachery
That has turned the spittle
In my mouth
To a protracted agony of torture.

Return of the Exile

(For Mongo Beti)

I

The departure was sudden,
Like a sleek canoe
Gliding in the smooth waters
Of a false dawn,
Under the exotic luminosity
Of a full moon,
Gliding quickly,
Away,
A lone passenger,
To exile.

The carved stool
Just vacated stayed warm
With vibrations of life
Newly departed.

Fine particles of dust
Floating in transparent
Rays of intruding fingers of sunlight
Discover a home without life;
The stool of life becomes
Haven for years of dust.

II

The nostalgic return home
To the ancestors,
To begin a new life.

Sojourn to foreign lands
Is wearing away of the spirit
In strange lands and customs.
Now the prodigal, the adulterator
Returns for cleansing
Face bowed to be
Reborn in ancestral shrines.

The raffia war-regalia
Soot-coated, has crumbled to dust;
The broken shrines have become
The abode of wandering reptiles.

Kinsmen now have strange ways:
A stranger at home, and
Alienation bites deep into the soul.
The hut you cherished
Has now crumbled to dust.

What is left
Is only walking shadows
Of bodies that were.
In heart-broken songs
New hope is gathered
For the agonizing journey
To a new beginning.

Limbe I: Miscarriage

Now that the tired uterus
Of mother Victoria* has collapsed
The quack gynaecologists
Have not salvaged
The once fertile maiden
From a postnatal death.

This premature infant
Dumped on our laps,
Faceless,
Without identity,
Is administered the first sacrament:
In nomine patris, et filli
Et spiritus sancti
Limbe, we welcome you
To our fold.

With aging lungs
We struggle to resuscitate
This muted miscarriage,
To put life into
What is now a stillbirth.

The first sacrament has
Become
The harbinger of extreme unction.

**Renamed Limbe (a coastal town where the poet was born).*

Limbe II: Death Throes

(Fruits of a truncated federalism)

Ever stumbled across
Discarded prey
That malevolent predators
Have mauled and mangled
Clutching the earth
In the last paroxysms of death throes,
Clinging to life without life?

So have we shrunken
Like the testicles
Of a dehydrated corpse,
Shunning the company of the living,
Clinging to the barest handouts,
Dribblets of shelter and oil.

Life drifts along.

Throngs of CDC labourers
Hollow, without salvation
Shuffle round and round
The weakest survive
In their sleep of eternal peace.

But we
With thick hides
Still linger on,
Walking cadavers,
Hoping to survive on
Man's betrayal of man.

Limbe III: Crucifixion

(To my brethren in the South West)

One day you will wake up at last
And embrace the gnomish nightmare.
You will wake up at dusk
From the vampire game,
Searching for a lost Victoria.

When the hangman strikes the gong
To usher the crucifixion,
There will be no cross,
Just a wooden stake
With driblets of salt water
Left over in arid oilfields.

In this sad moment of revelation
You will discover Victoria's chastity
Of hymeneal maiden-head,
The once cherished virginity
Has been laid waste and bare
In rude and arrogant rape.

Limbe IV: Purgatory

Ako Aya* was here to see Ambas Bay
And in posthumous error
Asked to speak to Bobe Ngom Jua.
What horror?
The rejoinder was the spectre-chuckle
From ghost ships anchored in Bota wharf.

Bobe's reply from the other side:
They see not
For they hear not
In their stupor of *brasserie* merriment,
The South-North-West divide
Self-forged shackles of enslavement
And fetters of self-colonisation.

Don't you feel the dead pulse
Of Victoria's arrested heartbeat,
Her suspended animation?
Ah, Victoria!
Hangs her sore breasts
And exposes her pus-laden,
Thatched-roof wretchedness of New Town
Glories of yesteryears
Have now faded like morn dew.

The servile peasantry of Bokwango
And the eternal mud and dust of
K-Town, Besongabang, Konye, Muyuka
And Mamfe,
Ah Mamfe, this time yesterday.

Alfred Saker's bronze bust
Dabs tears of 1850
As abandoned streets
And roads surface to
Short-lived merriment
Pot holes, laterite, and dust.

This halfmoon fantasy,
Glaucoma in petro-dreams:
The new breed of picaroons
Breaks speed limits
To Cape Limbo for oil,
Adding to the scummy
Menstrual coagulated flow from
Sexual excesses of Church Street.

Depart hence,
Spirit of the night;
Take Ngom Jua with you
And leave us in this
Tortured full cycle,
Our self-chosen purgatory.

Iscariot's victory it is
For thirty pieces of silver
After tyrannical subvert of consciences
And rape of soap boxes.

In morbid quest for naked power
I too perceived the smell
In this Gethsemane,
The false kiss of 'Rabbi'
From foul lips
And formalin drenched spittle.

It was—for eternal oblivion,
Thirty pieces of silver
And nothing else to show.

**A poisonous, raucous, layabout gossip columnist of the Cameroon Outlook in the 60s and 70s who was heavily censored and finally silenced.*

Limbe V: Telegram

(S.O.S. to Bobe Ngom Jua)

There has been no change, Bobe
The treasured legacy
From Parisian anaesthesia
Still
Haunts our dreams of tomorrow
As new anthems and slogans
Elevate us to novel heights
Of sadistic ecstasies

Like hypnotized mambas
We sway in unison
Dancing to charlatan pipers
Playing tuneless tunes
On decayed bamboo flutes
That history had discarded
On a sterile and wasted wayside.

Nothing much to add
Except that oil flows now
Amidst pangs of poverty and expectation.
And this sad chord too:
The countryside is
Now barren waste
After rural exodus to sprawling oil towns.

Hills have been reduced to
A mass of hard-brown naked ground.
Cowherds have left them
To seek sanctuary in the valleys;
And in defiance the stubborn harmattan
Whips along in frigid triumph.

For Just One Banana

I remember Jacob*
At the Victoria zoo
Who never dreamt
There would be oil.
Remember Jacob dressed
In human clothes?

Jacob it was
With the ludicrous bow tie
And French suit,
Drinking tea (sometimes red wine)
At midday with
Teacup and saucer, all complete:
That was Jacob.

In momentary delusion
Like Jean-Paul (*mon ami*)
Going back home to Paris
Was Jacob.

When he saw the mirror
He was still hairy
And charcoal black too.
No assimilation or affected mannerisms,
No nose-speaking stunts
No champagne popping expertise
Disguised the full-blown pubic hair,
With the crude molars
And the perpetual apish grin
Grunting at amused spectators
For just one banana.

One banana and still an ape
Depending on benefactors.
Still in custody,
In human clothes,
Jacob was, for just one banana.

In my dial of glass
I see a thousand cloned Jacobs
In power, breeding power
And absolute power breeding viperheads,
Carrion crows feeding
Fat on poverty and ignorance;
And assimilation in its
Merry-wine-round,
Aping games for apes
In post-independence betrayal.

Jacob it was
Who died in Victoria zoo
For one rotten banana.

Medals of Honour

(Reminiscences of CDC Middle Farms decorating ceremonies)

Decades of humpbacked service
In palm tree and rubber plantations,
Decades of bare survival
Carry neither silver nor gold
To fill hungry mouths
Of malnutrition-ridden children.

Your wages of palmtree harvests
Under searing tropical suns
And thunderstorms
Have only earned you
Medals stuck on
Your hollow chests
And stiff khaki salutes
With false handshakes.

Your honour lies in
Single cell-like shacks,
Whitewashed, windowless prisons.
Under this hot sun
You are crowned with wreaths
And cheap alloys of bronze.

Ancestral farmlands decompose,
Lose their fertility
To heaps of cow dung
While you migrate south, recruited hands,
To smell the ocean
And drink salt water
In vain promises of
Free food, free mattocks
In the hovels
And communal toilets
That have become your camps.

Your wages are now long,
Winding speeches of praise,
Greetings with perfumed embraces
By rich benefactors.
Attired in tattered clothes
You salute the green, red, yellow banner
Floating at full mast
Strangers and slaves in the
Land of your forebears.
Still chained to boys' quarters
And pit latrines.

O Mbamba Ngowo*
Protect them from this treachery
From they who harvest
Where they sow not.
The everlasting moan of anguish
Would be that of generations.
Your children's children
Will tell them
Their father's fathers
Attended no nursery schools
For they marched
On the paths of strangers
In their own land.

Their wages were
Medals of deceit:
They will now die, paupers,
Trapped in the vicious life
Of plantation exploitation.

**A personal spiritual & cosmic guide.*

At Dawn

(Yaoundé: June 6 1984, après le putsch)

Tired trails of filthy smoke
The emptiness of imported champagne
And mimetic sham of Parisian lifestyles
Float to the emerging dawn of an immature sky.

City in a trance
Heaps of human waste
The sprouting bequest from
Pale-faced colonial stiff necks
Slaps our freedom on the face.

I was there when cowherds entrenched
Their ebony-black buttocks,
Pre-independence alliances into
Strands of post-independence faeces.

In Abakwa, Fence, Briqueterie and New Town
The harsh rift of haves and have-nots
Culminates in the staccato concerto of this
Pre-dawn death music for traitors.

Pilate hand-washing
Special branch precision:
TREASON
Let the bullets be their pay packets.

Spirits detached from flesh;
We broke the 6th commandment to survive:
The wages of sin have now become instant death.

The cosmos unfolds
The pre-dawn miracle
Overdue caressing rhythm
The tattoo of drums and barrels of lead.

Behind me the pungent faeces
From bloated entrails
Spill into the streets
And the day has dawned.

The anthem and the tricolour flag
Flash metallic bayonets of
Buffoon sword-swinging republican guards,
Even the stiff-khaki hulk of
Polished flesh and camouflage uniforms,
All these were only
An unforeseen overdose
Of political laughing gas.

Feast of Ramadan

(*Remembering Ahmadou Ahidjo**)

Crouched in unknown
Petals of nomadic silence
An infant crept in
Urine-coated cow faeces
Drinking milk as cowherds
Recited verses from the Koran,
Tents anchored firmly
On sand dunes and desert whirlwinds.

Allah holds back the looming threat
Of diarrhoea and dysentery,
Cheating the itching fingers of death.
Allahu Akbar.

Two decades later,
Still unknown
Parents forgotten in some cemetery
Oblivious of the strange hands of fate
The ambitious mind is disciplined
To take up the challenge of the first elevation:
Whether to stay cattle boy,
Become lycée graduate,
Headmaster or postmaster.
Incarnates from rural herds
To neo-colonial capital
Forging out one facet of the
Polyfaces of ambiguous democracy.

In the two-dimensional elevation
A new world of power
Is revealed by personal marabouts:
Minds of men like mice are silenced
By the police, army, and secret service.
Allahu Akbar.

In the third elevation
The face of one god
Is contorted into brazen images of
A thousand false gods.
Men are now mice
Trapped in ghoulish underground chambers,
Currents of electricity passaged through their genitals
Remind them gently to confess
To thoughts of treason, subversion, or sabotage.
Screams and agony are muffled by
The mocking echo of blood-stained walls.

In one gigantic orgasm of power
Tribesmen meteor to ambassadors, ministers
And commanders of republican guards.

After balloon bouts
Of asthmatic laughter
Tickled by putrid flesh and
Silent flight of disoriented souls,
Big brother's bust,
Arrogant and sneering like Ozymandias
At the triumph of immortality,
Is minted on currency, postage stamps,
Lottery tickets, stamped on congress halls.

Yesterday a once flourishing
Republic of human depredators crumbled
Releasing a set of trigger-happy
Slate-clean-minded simpletons
Attempting to alter the face of history.

In hasty retreat
Big brother's caravan
Lumbers away to exile,
Just before the feast of Ramadan.

**First Cameroonian head of state*

Song of Ethiopia*

[Background sound of sombre music. Stage is illuminated gradually as narrator enters with dead child]

Child, now that the rains
Have gone on exile
What shall I do with the
Desiccated remains of your wasted body?

Our once mighty rivers:
The Ashangi, the Shala
Awash, even the Mareb
From which the Eritreans drank
Flowed into Lake Tana,
Providing life for all.

Then the soil was moist and swollen
With the richness that gave us
Tons of millet harvests.

The land was rich with diverse crops,
Cattle, goats, sheep, and donkeys.

When we went to the farms,

It was with joy and laughter

In our happy hearts

For the fertile soil

A few weeks later

Yielded its first fruit:

A thousand eyes of little

Sprouting tufts of millet

Pushed their way through the soil.

Young men played with maidens

In the emptiness of the moonlit night

Our laughter lasted till dawn,

As we played games of hide and seek.

[sounds of women, children singing and clapping hands; laughter and ululations]

Under the golden twinkle of a million starry stars

We celebrated the richness of our soil.

The moonbeams were brilliant;

The smell of cinnamon and

The fiery fires of passion filled the air.

I could hear the chirping of crickets

And owls hooting,

[sounds of laughter etc fade and sounds of crickets, owls, begin]

Wild dogs in Asmara Mountains

Baying at the full moon:

That is how I met your father.

When you were born

It was in the harvest season,
So we named you Tsedey,
Daughter of the harvest season.
Your father, Desta, potent and virile
Had planted millet seeds in the fields
And his seed in me.

[sounds of crickets, owls fade]

When I was gripped in the
Uterine pangs of your birth
The waters of our land
Like the birth water in
Womb that carried you
Were pregnant with life.
Aaaaaaaah, how could we know
That this was to be the last harvest!

That was five years ago.
There was an unusual dryness in the hot midday air;
And after the second month
When we expected the first rains
The soil started losing its moistness.
With an increasing intensity
The sun scorched the few millet plants
That had defied the intense heat.
Gradually the soil crumbled at
The slightest touch of the hand.

Even now I can hear the
Harsh harmattan winds
Blowing across the Sahara desert.
I can still see the whirlwinds of sand and dust.
I can hear the howling rage of sandstorms
Wiping away whole villages, once fertile fields,
Obliterating entire clans.
So we left our land
And ever since, like ghosts,
We have been wandering from place to place
Looking for food and water.

I have seen thousands drop wearily,
Their last flicker of life betrayed
By a feeble movement of a hand.

[Narrator begins to sob]

I have seen Kebede, Abebe, Regassa,
Proud farmers who owned cattle,

Drop by the road side,
[background moans of dying women, children, and men]
Their skeletal remains to feed
The low-flying desert vultures.
I have seen the children of
Fatuma, Kedija, Hirut, and Beriha
Suckle emaciated breasts with no milk.
These hands have borne funeral biers,
Carried large rocks to unmarked graves
Where our children lie buried by waysides.

I have seen mourning
I have heard wailing
I have witnessed death,
Now I cannot mourn
I cannot wail,
I only wait for death.

The children of Abraham
Lost tribe of Dan
Have been airlifted to Zion
And their ancient star of David
Shines in a new-found temple.
But we, exiles in our land,
Where do we go?
This is our land.
Why are the gods so merciless?
Why must it be Gondar?
Why the children of Axum?
What abomination has Tigré committed?
Or Eritrea?
What transgression has Wollo committed?
Why must it be our land?
If you are out there God, talk to me.
[sound of howling wind]

Are we not your children?
Are we not the descendants
Of the strong King Theodore?
Did our forefathers not bathe in
The pride and glory of Amda Sion,
Saifa Arad, Lebna Dengel?
Where are you King Kasa the mighty?
Listen to my cry, mighty Menelek,
[sound of wind fades]

Queen Sheeba, Ras Tafari, Lion of Judah.
Restore the ancient glory of Abyssinia.

I know I cannot walk on
I am sick of the dryness.
God, if you are out there
Lead the children on
Towards any river
Lead them on
Towards any stream
Lead them on
To the sea itself.
But let them find water
Let there be rain.
Listen to the moan
Of innocent and famished children.
Lord, if you are there
Receive my spirit
Even as I die,
Let those surviving have rain.
Let it soak the soil
And restore Abyssinia
To its rightful place
In the empires of the world.

[Narrator collapses and dies. Enter robed maidens who perform rain dance for two or three minutes. Suddenly a crash of thunder interrupts the rain dance. The maidens are flung to the floor. Thunder and lightning continue as rain comes. The faint melody of a flute is heard in the distance. Maidens rise slowly and continue the rain dance for a while as the rain continues. The melody of the flute begins to fade as the stage lights fade on robed dancers, dead narrator and child. Curtain falls as sound of rain fades with light]

**Originally dramatised on stage in 1984 at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia and then broadcast by CKDU 97 one week after its initial staging.*

EPILOGUE

The Ascent

(For Bate Besong: R.I.P)

I

A Caravan of white buffalos
Echoes your name
On golden summits of
Phosphorus glowing mountains

& your spirit is trapped in mangled metal
On the road to Edea, not yet ascended.

Twelve candle stands
& glowing balustrades
Of sanctifying incense witness
This apparition of
Monks from gothic monasteries
Heads bowed in prostration
To the endless columns of
These cherubim and seraphim

& your spirit is still earthbound,
Not yet ascended.

For unto us a warrior was delivered
& from us a prophet has been taken.
Distant drumbeats
Herald his transformation
& the Obasinjom dancers
Sway in hypnotic frenzy

& your spirit staggers on the road to Edea
Still earthbound.

II

Saints Peter & Paul Catholic parish
Close to the University of Buea:
Choirboys in robes of alabaster
Join the hallelujah chorus
In joyous epiphany,
Arpeggio of D in the middle octave
& diatonic of scales above

& your spirit vibrates in indecision,
Not yet ascended.

Gigantic pipe organs grind
Away the warrior's laments
To scalp-raising crescendos
As ripples of celestial waves
Break & recede endlessly
On shingles & pebbles
On islands unknown
In pinnacles of cosmic shores

& your spirit vibrates,
Vibrates in uncertainty.

III

& behold the glorious
Miracle of Pentecost in Ndekwei:
In one mighty surge of
Iridescent illumination
Vibrating spectrums of
Resurrection fires blind
Feeble mortal eyes

& your spirit vibrates
The spirit vibrates.

Ten thousand harpsichords
Double the soprano on D minor
With trumpets & trombones.

& your spirit ascends
The spirit is lifted up
Leaving behind the
Pathos of ephemeral mortality
To be received in immortality
& crowned in the
Cathedral of saints.

Resurrection

When I die,
Do not shed tears
Over my stiff body
Or flatter my bereaved family
By telling them
Things I never did.

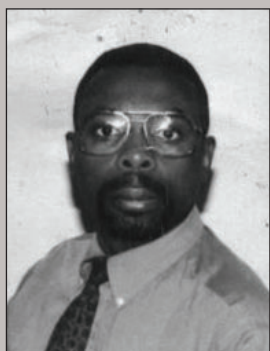
Do not cremate me
Or imprison me in a coffin.
You will only torture me
And I may die
A second death.

Strip me as naked
As the day I was born
And plant me in
Four feet of soil
In the womb of the earth.

After seven days
I will germinate at dawn
When the first rays
Of the rising sun
Awaken my hibernating soul.

“This stimulating collection of poetry is endowed with artistic talent and sensibilities. Mutia offers wide-sweeping poetic skill and experience, for he draws from the historic and the modern, from the urban and the rural, the deeply personal and the universally sacred, and from the oral culture of Africa and the written culture of the West. The poems embrace the experiences of the African world and reflect as well the overwhelming ennui that is the burden of all true poets.” — Chief (Professor) Nol Alembong, Head of Department of African Literature, University of Yaoundé I, Cameroon

The diverse voices in the poems in this collection are unified in the single voice of the omnipresent persona who appears to be searching for a collective voice, some kind of order or rhythm that would impose meaning to life. Reading the poems constitutes an individual journey. This poetic journey from *Awakening* that takes the reader to *Moonlight Spells & Wreaths* and leads her/him through *Laments to the Epilogue* is a continuous movement in the search for humanity's existence. As a metaphor of self-discovery, the poetic quest is both an expression of, and a search for mankind's elusive self—that single, unbroken umbilical cord that is firmly rooted in the African experience and identity.



Ba'bila Mutia teaches oral and written literatures, creative writing, advanced writing and research methodology, at the University of Yaoundé I. His poetry and short stories have been featured in anthologies and reviews worldwide, and his work has been broadcast on the BBC. In June of 1993 Mutia was honoured by the Berlin Academy of Arts as special guest writer in an international writers' reading. He is the author of *Whose Land?* (Longman), *Before This Time, Yesterday* (Silex/ Nouvelles du Sud) and “*The Miracle*” in the *Heinemann Book of Contemporary African Short Stories*.



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